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*BENKŐ Levente*¹:

A Narrow Breathing Space. The Issue of Prisoners in Bishop János Vásárhelyi's Correspondence between 1944 and 1945²

Abstract.

In his study, the author focuses on analysing how the issue of war prisoners and of Reformed civilians dragged away from their homes is presented in the correspondence of Bishop János Vásárhelyi, the leader of the Reformed Church District of Transylvania. He also discusses the steps the bishop could take to obtain the release of the captives.

The author lists a number of examples illustrating the measures implemented in September 1944 at first by the Hungarian military authorities leaving northern Transylvania and then by the Romanian and Soviet military authorities marching in and whisking along Hungarian ecclesiastical personalities and also members of the congregation.

One can find out from the study the efforts Bishop János Vásárhelyi made to convince the Hungarian authorities to release the members of Romanian Greek Catholic and Orthodox high clergy they had in their custody, and afterwards how

¹ Doctoral candidate, Babeş–Bolyai University, Faculty of Reformed Theology, Ecumenical Doctoral School, Email: benkolevente@gmail.com. Levente Benkő (born in 1961, Nagyajta/Aita Mare) – graduated from the Faculty of History and Philosophy of Babeş–Bolyai University (2006); currently 1st year doctoral candidate. Research interests include prisoners' life during World War II and the effects and consequences of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and fight for freedom in Romania. Author of several historical books and studies.

² This article was subsidized by the Committee of National Remembrance.

he attempted to obtain the release of the Reformed Church's clergymen, teachers, and professors and also of one of his family members imprisoned by the Romanian authorities in Romanian lagers.

Furthermore, the study points out the fact that in that period many Hungarians who were transported to the Soviet Union in large prisoner trains via Kolozsvár/Cluj asked for help too, and the bishop tried to help within the narrow margins and with the few means that he had.

Keywords: *Bishop, János Vásárhelyi, World War II, Reformed Church District of Transylvania, prisoner, Groza.*

The church and the faithful suffered severe damage and loss in the fronts and transit areas of northern and southern Transylvania during the final phase of World War II. During the fights, churches, clergy houses and cantor dwellings, church school buildings were damaged, relics, artefacts were destroyed or disappeared, and church archives as well as libraries were partially or completely destroyed or scattered. In several cases, believers fell victim to atrocities committed by soldiers and civilians.

According to the latest research on the territory of Greater Hungary, the number of prisoners can be estimated at 960,000–1,026,000.³ This included soldiers taken prisoners during hostilities and civilians deported from their homes. Documents have been preserved about the fate of various Hungarians deported to concentration camps in Romania and the Soviet Union in the records of the Reformed Church District of Transylvania of the time. As part of an ongoing project to explore the 1944–1945 war chronicle of the district, including the above-mentioned losses, we will examine how the issue emerges in Bishop János Vásárhelyi's (1888–1960) correspondence and how the bishop assessed the situation and the information he received.

³ See more in: BOGNÁR, Zalán (2017): 960 ezer vagy több mint 1 millió (hadi) fogoly? Az 1941–1945 között szovjet (hadi) fogságba vetett magyar állampolgárok (katonák és civilek) létszáma és halálzási arányuk. In: *Emberek az embertelenségben. A Gulág és a Gupvi. A Gulágkutatók Nemzetközi Társaságának évkönyve, 2015–2017*. Budapest, Gulágkutatók Nemzetközi Társasága–Kairosz Kiadó. 66–98.

1. Bilateral Romanian–Hungarian Detentions during the Retreating Front

János Vásárhelyi already faced the imminent threat of war at the beginning of October 1944. This was the period between 13 September and 7 October when Hungarian and German troops stopped the Soviet and Romanian troops attacking from southern Transylvania for almost a month in the Torda/Turda area.⁴ In the existing war situation, Iuliu Hossu⁵ Greek Catholic Bishop of Kolozsvár-Szamosújvár/Cluj-Gherla sent a letter to János Vásárhelyi.⁶ The Greek Catholic bishop informed his Reformed peer, among others: in his submission, he reported to government commissioner Count Béla Bethlen⁷ that the Hungarian authorities kept Romanian intellectuals in house arrest in Szamosújvár and had Greek Catholic priests dig trenches, while practising priests and theologians in pastoral care were summoned to labour. Hossu also informed Vásárhelyi that the Dean of Nagysármás/Sărmașu, Liviu Stupineanu, and the old, retired pastor of Nagysármás/Sărmașu, Alexandru Micu, were interned in the detention centre in Kolozsvár/Cluj⁸ and from there they were sent away on foot with several others to Zsibó/Jibou. He also reported that Dr Alexandru Russu,⁹ his fellow bishop in Nagybánya/Baia Mare

⁴ See more in: RAVASZ, István (1999): Az erdélyi hadműveletek 1944 késő nyarán – kora őszén. In: *Hadtörténelmi közlemények* 112, 1999/4. 756–784.

⁵ Iuliu Hossu (1885–1970): Romanian Greek Catholic priest, Bishop of Kolozsvár-Szamosújvár/Cluj-Gherla, cardinal.

⁶ Episcopal Archives under the Central Archives of the Reformed Church District of Transylvania (Ep. A. CARCDT), collection A21, registered documents, no. 1423/1944. (Description of the original Hungarian source: *Az Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület püspöki levéltára az Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület Központi Gyűjtőlevéltárában, fond A21, iktatott iratok, 1423/1944* [as the documentary material of the episcopal archives have no box or folio numbers, only file/dossier numbers]).

⁷ Count Dr Béla Bethlen (1888–1979) of Betlen, Transylvanian landowner, jurist, politician. Supreme comes of Szolnok-Doboka/Solnoc-Dăbâca and Beszterce-Naszód/Bistrița-Năsăud counties between 1940 and October 1944, Government Commissioner of Northern Transylvania between September and October 1944.

⁸ Since 1974 in Romanian: Cluj-Napoca.

⁹ Alexandru Rusu (1884–1963): Romanian Greek Catholic priest, bishop, the first Greek Catholic Bishop of Maramureș Diocese starting from 1930.

was still in house arrest; he also brought to his attention the fate of Dr Emil Hațieganu,¹⁰ leading personality of the Romanians in Northern Transylvania, who was in restricted residence in the Bishop's Palace in Győr. Bishop Hossu also said that the army had unlawfully taken his Packard brand car from him, for which he turned verbally and in writing to "His Excellencies the Mayor of Kolozsvár and the Supreme Comes and the Hungarian Royal Chief of the Police" but still did not get his vehicle back; finally, he mentioned that the army looted their family farm and family house in Nagynyulas/Milaş, and "the soldiers took everything that could be taken away from the Romanian villages in the area".¹¹

The case of Greek Catholic Bishop Liviu Stupineanu, who was deported from Nagysármás/Sărmaşu, was first encountered in early 1945. On 18 January, Károly Gergely, a Reformed pastor in Nagysármás/Sărmaşu, wrote a letter to János Vásárhelyi, as it reads, for his own peace of mind and his followers' peace, he should inform his bishop: "when the Hungarian army was here, the camp gendarmerie arrested and took away Greek Catholic Dean Dr Liviu Stupineanu (with many others, border police, etc.), although I took personal responsibility for him and his release". Minister Gergely's attempt failed although, as he put it, Dean Stupineanu "was mild-mannered, harmless for the Hungarian community". That is why the Reformed pastor asked for Bishop Vásárhelyi's help to find out the whereabouts of the abducted Greek Catholic bishop and his fellow clergymen.¹² In a letter dated 9 February, János Vásárhelyi asked Imre Révész, the Transtibiscan Reformed Bishop, to "clarify the matter via the Ministry of Defence and send out a notice to him about Dr Stupineanu", as "it would be a true gift and a great relief for the clergy of Southern Transylvania in a similar situation to finally launch a powerful movement in the Hungarian authorities and help such pastors as Dean Dr Stupineanu who were dragged away despite their innocence", as was the case of Pál Csia and many of his fellow clergymen, who were in turn detained by the Romanian authorities. According to János Vásárhelyi, "it would be a great benefit if the measures taken, now meaningless or insignificant, were dissolved by the Hungarian party".¹³

¹⁰ Emil Hațieganu (1878–1959): Romanian jurist, politician, leading figure of the Transylvanian Romanian National Party and its successor, the National Peasant Party.

¹¹ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 1423/1944.

¹² Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 75/1945.

¹³ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 76/1945.

Simultaneously with the internment of the Romanian ecclesiastical leaders in Northern Transylvania and the Hungarian civilians in Southern Transylvania, especially after the withdrawal of the Hungarian authorities from Northern Transylvania, János Vásárhelyi received information about the flood of atrocities affecting the Hungarian community during the transition period, as proven by his correspondence. Since the atrocities proper are not the subject of this study, we will not address them now, but we will only examine the issue of abductions. According to this, on 27 November 1944, Ferenc Csulak, Reformed minister in Hátszeg/Hațeg, sent a letter to János Vásárhelyi, informing him that from among the ministers of Hunyad/Hunedoara County, pastor Sándor Soó from Vulkan/Vulcan and Dr Ferenc Simon, a Levite minister in Petrozsény/Petroșani, were dragged away to the Târgu Jiu internment camp, while from Nagyenyed/Aiud József Nagy and several other teachers of the city were among the prisoners.¹⁴ Here we encounter the first letter from which János Vásárhelyi had learned about the imprisonment of ministers and believers.

At the end of January 1945, Reformed pastor József Csiky of Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureș forwarded a brief note from Nagyenyed to János Vásárhelyi, containing a prisoner's message listing three names (pastor Pál Csiky, Márton Paizs, and Mihály Szabó), which read as follows: "Reverend Father Pál Csiky's brother-in-law is here in captivity in Nagyenyed on the Fischer Estate",¹⁵ on the site where one of the Romanian prison camps operated in the fall of 1944.

Ferenc Nagy, Vice-Bishop of the South Transylvanian district formed after splitting the church district pursuant to the Second Vienna Award, reported to János Vásárhelyi in a lengthy account on the deportations in Southern Transylvania, the situation there in general, including the situation in the Nagyenyed Reformed College. In his undated status report filed with the bishopric on 19 March 1945,¹⁶ he summarized, among other things, the serious maintenance issues that the secondary school in Nagyenyed, which had suffered war damages, was struggling with during the time. Additionally, he reported that since 26 August 1944 several teachers of the College, Viktor Elekes, József Nagy,

¹⁴ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 1385/1944.

¹⁵ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 59/1945.

¹⁶ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 165/1945. The undated report was registered by the bishopric's registrar as no. 165 on 19 March 1945.

Zsigmond Vita, Zoltán Horváth, and Zoltán Jarosievitz, “had been taken hostage and transported to Gyulafehérvár/Alba Iulia on 17 September and then to Târgu Jiu; so, they were kept in an internment camp”. In addition to them, Árpád Bakó, Gyula Szathmáry, Ferenc Deák, Lajos Rácz, Gyula Csáky, István Veress Jr, teacher of economics, and Dr Miklós Könnyű, office manager and part-time teacher, were called in to military labour camps. At the end of October, the Soviets took Ernő Donáth, a lower secondary school teacher, from Torda with an interned group to Brassó/Braşov; the chief curator of the secondary school and President of the Transylvanian Hungarian Economics Association, Dr Pál Szász, was interned at his residence in Gáldtő/Galţiu; “and now, when his actions would be needed every hour, there is no possibility for him to come to Enyed/Aiud”. In addition to them, at the time of the report, Árpád Péterffy from Gyulafehérvár and Dr Ferenc Simon, a Reformed teacher from Petrosény/Petroşani, were at the prisoner camp in Târgu Jiu, while Viktor Dániel, Director of the School of Commerce in Brassó, István Sisak, a teacher at the School of Commerce, and Gyula Turó, a Reformed elementary school teacher from Brassó were in the Brassó internment camp. Ferenc Nagy noted that “in addition to these, it is possible that several of our teachers are interned, but only these have been reported,” adding that older students were also called in to labour camps, and some of them were still there. According to the report, after 23 August 1944, Reformed pastors Béla Hamar from Bucharest, József Nagy from Balázsfalva/Blaj, István Régeni from Gyulafehérvár, Mihály Tar from Abrudbánya/Abrud, and Mihály Nagy from Tompaháza/Rădeşti were taken from Nagyenyed to Gyulafehérvár on 18 September 1944 and then to Târgu Jiu. In addition, Pál Csia, Reformed Bishop of Brassó, and Ádám Geréb, Reformed curate in Brassó, were interned there. Ferenc Nagy described that in the case of the above ministers “no objection was raised regarding their political conduct, but rather “they were “arrested as hostages”. Ferenc Nagy added that the “internment of pastors released from internment camps in the meantime actually lasts longer because they are interned in their respective houses¹⁷ that they could not leave”, and they were also told that “the pastors released from the internment camps cannot hold Sunday celebrations, go to church, or perform funeral services because the police officer interprets home internment as the priest not being allowed to exit the parish gate”. Ferenc Nagy also listed that

¹⁷ Highlight in the original.

Reformed minister Ferenc Gilyén from Tordatúr/Tureni fled to Nagyenyed during the battle of Torda, but he could not return home to his place of service because the police of Nagyenyed would not allow him to. Ferenc Nagy himself was in a similar situation as he had not received a permit to return home to his parish in Tövis/Teiuş; however, when he did so on foot on 26 October, he was called in and questioned by the local gendarmerie, threatening him not to leave Nagyenyed because otherwise he would be handcuffed and taken to the gendarmerie.

Ferenc Nagy also reported that Áron Márton, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Gyulafehérvár and Dr Pál Szász, Chief Curator of the Reformed college came to Nagyenyed on 3 November on a carriage – the former for visitation, the latter for the issue of the Bethlen college –, but the gendarmerie took statements from them the next morning and escorted them to Gyulafehérvár. According to Ferenc Nagy, at the same time, József Szócs, a teacher in Kutyfalva/Cuci, was taken to the internment camp in Hídvég/Hăghig,¹⁸ and “many of our elementary and secondary school teachers were called in to labour duty”,¹⁹ and “there is a special provision that Hungarians may not be released.” According to the report, Sándor Szécsi, a teacher at the commercial school in Brassó, János Bálint, a Reformed teacher from Lupény/Lupeni, and Dénes Szabó, a Reformed teacher from Magyarfráta/Frata, were in a similar situation.

The Roman Catholics were in a similar situation. For example, in a letter dated 8 March 1945, József Bereczky, a Reformed minister in Tasnád/Tăşnad, informed János Vásárhelyi that even people going to church on Sunday had been called in to labour, and about 450 people in the area, 90% percent of which were Roman Catholics, were recruited on 3 January 1945 and had been taken to Russia to forced labour, including the Roman Catholic chaplain and some of his fellow Catholic clergymen in the area.²⁰

On 20 February 1945, József Veress Győri, a Reformed minister in Toldalag/Toldal, informed János Vásárhelyi in a lengthy letter on the atrocities committed against his family and the congregation. According to his description, after 11 days of fierce fighting,

¹⁸ It may refer to prison camp no. 2 operating in Barcafdödvár/Feldioara (Brassó County) in Háromszék/Trei Scaune, near Hídvég. In 1944–1945, other prisoners were kept in Hídvég/Hăghig for a short time, but they were not Hungarian.

¹⁹ Highlight in the original.

²⁰ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 162/1945.

German troops withdrew on 30 September 1944, and Soviet troops entered the village. One night, drunken Soviet soldiers beat the minister within an inch of his life, looted the family, and raped his young wife before his very eyes. The 33-year-old pastor was detained by the Romanian gendarmerie after the war front had passed through the area and was then transported on foot to Segesvár/Sighișoara on 4 November, from where he was taken by train to the Târgu Jiu internment camp. From there, “after much starvation, cold, and humiliating treatment”, on the night of 31 December, he escaped with one of his fellow pastors, György Szilveszter from Nyárádselye/Șilea Nirajului, and one of his companions was shot while fleeing. József Veress Győri returned home on 5 January 1945. The pastor also wrote that “many faithful from the parish of Toldalag/Toldal, Unoka/Onuca, and Vajdaszentivány/Voivodeni were “deported to various camps.”²¹

2. Requests for Assistance in Prisoner Matters

Towards the end of February 1945, János Vásárhelyi was already personally affected by the problem of detentions as his son-in-law, Colonel Tibor Vladár, was a prisoner of war in the Brassó camp.²² From then on, it can be noticed that the bishop paid more attention and tried to find a remedy, even at the highest levels, especially to free his family member.

Meanwhile, Hungarian women from Kolozsvár asked János Vásárhelyi for help in prisoner matters. In a letter dated 2 March, Mrs József Péterffi wrote to the bishop “on behalf of all Hungarian women in Kolozsvár, on behalf of crying and desperate Hungarian mothers, spouses and orphaned children” “for aid, protection and patronage for the unfortunate, deported Hungarians, who were abducted without any particular reason from their families, from their homes, were cruelly tortured and taken to their deaths”. The letter-writer said that if the fate of the Hungarian men deported from Kolozsvár in October 1944 was called to account anywhere, they would be silenced by

²¹ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 104/1945.

²² Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 94/1945.

saying “they are not having a hard time, or they are coming home, etc.”²³ According to previous research, the number of civilians deported from Kolozsvár is estimated at 5,000. The sender presents their destiny in the following way: “Your Excellency is aware (...) that thousands of people have been deported from this very city as well, so you can feel our terrible spiritual pain”. They asked Vásárhelyi to “do it for them, do it for your fellows, for all of us, and speak to the Hungarian government to take action and bring home the unfortunate deported Hungarian people who suffer in the camps in Focșani and other camps.”²⁴

Only three weeks later, on 22 March, did József Szakáts’s widow, a former teacher in Kolozsvár, sent a letter from Oradea to Bishop János Vásárhelyi about the deportations. The sender, whose son was also among the prisoners, asked the bishop to intervene on behalf of the Reformed mothers and wives of Southern Transylvania for the release of the South Transylvanian Reformed ministers deported to the Târgu Jiu prison camp in August 1944, because, as she said, “we have no one to turn to but God Almighty and Your Excellency”.²⁵ In his reply of 4 April, János Vásárhelyi informed József Szakáts’s widow that he had already addressed the complaint at the cabinet meeting of the Groza government held in Kolozsvár on 13 March, and the Prime Minister had promised to see about the release of the deported ministers. The bishop also referred to his latitude when he said: “Unfortunately, I can’t do more, but I will do whatever possible.”²⁶

The letter in which minister József Bereczky of Tasnád spoke about the deportations reported to János Vásárhelyi on 14 April 1945 that: “during the Holy Week, many of our ministers, teachers, and congregation members were arrested by the police officers in Tasnád”, while Ferenc Balogh, a minister in Magyarcsaholy/Cehăluț, was taken to Zilah/Zalău on Easter morning with the charge of anti-partisan operations after having been imprisoned in Tasnád for one week, and “in the local chief constable’s opinion he is at risk of being deported to Siberia”.²⁷

²³ In the issue dated 23 November 1944, the *Világosság* daily newspaper published in Kolozsvár called the Hungarian men deported from Kolozsvár as “men deported in the first days after the liberation for security reasons”.

²⁴ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 147/1945.

²⁵ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 187/1945.

²⁶ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 198/1945.

²⁷ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 273/1945.

3. The Matter of the Deported during and after the Cabinet Meeting Held in Kolozsvár on 13 March 1945

In this context, let us consider Bishop János Vásárhelyi's steps/attempts undertaken before the Romanian and Hungarian government bodies, including personally Romanian Prime Minister Dr Petru Groza and Hungarian Prime Minister Béla Miklós Dálnoki²⁸ in favour of the deportees. As it is well known, the Groza government, which took over on 6 March 1945, held a cabinet meeting one week later, on the 13th in Kolozsvár, at which time the Romanian administration, which had withdrawn on 11 November 1944 on Soviet order, was allowed to return to Northern Transylvania. Along with local ecclesiastical and secular leaders, King Michael I of Romania, members of the government, and Soviet envoys also participated in the event held on 13 March in Kolozsvár. Worship services were held in the churches of all denominations as part of a series of events that included a rally, a reception, and a gala dinner. In the downtown Reformed church on Farkas Street in Kolozsvár, János Vásárhelyi called the ceremony a service held on the occasion of a "great historical turn". As he put it, the "new power creating the new context, the head of the Russian Empire and the government taking over the administration, had the voice of the Transylvanian Hungarians, including the Reformed Church heard inside the Romanian state, and expressed their firm determination to create a harmonious cooperation based on mutual recognition among the nations". The bishop asked God's blessing upon the country, the king, and the government, and then he prayed for world peace, "for the poor, the sick, the fighting and bleeding soldiers, those in captivity, those suffering war and persecution."²⁹

The afternoon cabinet meeting was attended by Bishop János Vásárhelyi and György Martonossy, legal adviser, representing the Transylvanian Reformed Church District. Following the protocol greetings that opened the meeting, the Soviets left the room.³⁰

²⁸ Béla Miklós de Dálnok, Vitéz of Dálnok (1890–1948): officer, general, politician of Szekler origin, Prime Minister of Hungary between 22 December 1944 and 15 November 1945.

²⁹ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 423/1945.

³⁰ NASTASĂ, Lucian – ANDREESCU, Andreea – VARGA, Andrea (eds.) (2002): *Minorităţi etno-culturale, Mărturii documentare, maghiarii din România (1945–1955)*. Cluj, Centrul de Resurse pentru Diversitate Etnoculturală, Diversitate etnoculturală în România. 69–70.

We have two sources about the speech János Vásárhelyi's delivered there. According to one of them, the bishop's pre-written speech for the cabinet meeting expressed the faithful's, the pastors', and the teachers' "deep respect, trust and loyalty" to the king, the government, and the allied powers on behalf of the Transylvanian Reformed Church District, among other things. "We came from the house of the Lord, God's church, and prayed fervently that God's protection would surround Your Majesty and help the high government to ensure calm, peaceful, harmonious cooperation here for the benefit of the peoples and nations living here on this land, according to the generous goals the peoples living here have been assigned by the allies" – stands in the text, according to which János Vásárhelyi placed the churches, schools, priests, and the Reformed faithful under the protection of the king and the government, and then he concluded: "Long live the King! Long live the Government! May God protect our country, our mighty allies, to create a blessed life of peace for the suffering world!"³¹ It is not known whether János Vásárhelyi literally said or read this text before the meeting since the edited text of another source – namely the (shorthand) minutes of the meeting – contains a very different text with some dissimilar elements. According to this, János Vásárhelyi spoke in Hungarian, being interpreted into Romanian by György Martonossy, and said, among others: "here and now, it would be inappropriate to put forward our requests and grievances, but we respectfully ask the Prime Minister and the Minister of Religious and Ethnic Affairs to allow us to submit our requests in a memorandum. We thank you for this opportunity and allow us this time to request the release of the pastors and teachers who have been interned because they are Hungarian and who can be charged of no other sin so that they can return to their parishes and schools. With the release of the internees, Hungarian families – wives, mothers, and children – will be as happy as the Romanian nation is today."³²

Bypassing a straight answer, Groza said the following, referring to Hungarian ministers and teachers: "At the time of our inauguration, we promised that no one would remain in the camp because of their political beliefs and that we would take immediate action for their release."³³

³¹ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 148/1945.

³² NASTASĂ – ANDREESCU – VARGA 2002, 76.

³³ Ibid.

No matter which version of the text was uttered, it can be noticed that János Vásárhelyi assured the king and the government of his full loyalty and willingness to cooperate, calling for peace and Christian brotherhood. At the same time, at least from the two sources available to us, he did not address the issue of all the Reformed Hungarians deported from their homes in the autumn of 1944, but – if the “clean” text of the minutes was indeed identical to the speech uttered during the meeting – he only limited his speech to the case of the deported Hungarian ministers and teachers. According to the minutes, however, it can also be noticed that Prime Minister Dr Petru Groza’s answer was evasive and turned the issue of deportation away from nationality towards the political side.

Regardless of his ambiguous, evasive response, János Vásárhelyi proved optimistic when in his letter of 15 March³⁴ he informed briefly Imre Révész, Bishop of the Transilvian Reformed Church District, about the event in Kolozsvár that happened two days earlier and during which – in his opinion – “the Prime Minister of the country’s government made a serious statement in the spirit of Romanian–Hungarian reconciliation, which gives us hope that we can continue our church’s work with rewards”. Vásárhelyi founded his statement on the fact that “Prime Minister Groza was, for that matter, a student of our college in Szászváros/Orăștie and recalls the time he spent there with gratitude. He has always been benevolent towards our church and our institutions.” Vásárhelyi was just as optimistic in the letter³⁵ he sent to the parsonage in Brassó on 15 March 1945, in which he expressed his hope that Minister Pál Csia, who had been taken prisoner, had already returned home. The bishop informed the people in Brassó that: “During his recent visit to Kolozsvár, Prime Minister Groza stated in his speech that he fully understood the justification for my proposal, which I had made in favour of the deportees, and for his part had already taken steps to deal with the issue favourably and to release the internees.” This wording by János Vásárhelyi still does not dispel the ambiguity and raises again the question whether at the cabinet meeting on 13 March he really mentioned only the abducted Reformed pastors, teachers, and educators or all the Reformed faithful deported from their homes.

³⁴ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 144/1945.

³⁵ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 152/1945.

Unfortunately, in his autobiography,³⁶ János Vásárhelyi did not address the meeting in question, his speech delivered during the meeting, or the details of the problems affecting the church district, including the question of the deportees. He explained this in his autobiography, writing that after the Romanian transition on 23 August 1944 “we were living such exciting times, and I was so busy that I had neither the mood nor the time to take such notes. There was a rush of events and constant action had to be taken.” In the cited source, in the part talking about his visit to the Romanian government, personally to Dr Petru Groza, he did not mention either whether the issue of the deportees had been discussed. All he recorded about his visit to Bucharest was that he requested Groza to allow the South Transylvanian Church District to return to the diocese and help settle its government in accordance with internal ecclesiastical laws while restoring the old status. And Groza approved it. Unfortunately, in his autobiography, Bishop Vásárhelyi does not touch upon whether he had discussed the issue of internees with Prime Minister Groza.

4. Vanished Hopes, Collective Impossibility

Anyway, János Vásárhelyi’s confidence did not bring the expected result – the deportees remained in the camps or were on their way to or had already arrived at the prison camps in the Soviet Union. This was obviously due to some factors that overwrote Vásárhelyi’s intentions. These included the fact that the presence of Soviet troops along with the political police, the NKVD,³⁷ in the Carpathian Basin, more specifically in Romania, provided an already restrictive – close to zero – room for manoeuvre for all those involved in the release and return of prisoners during this period, irrespective of what they could

³⁶ Central Archives of the Reformed Church District of Transylvania, collection F30. János Vásárhelyi’s legacy. VÁSÁRHELYI, János: *Emlékeim. Önéletrajz...* Manuscript written in Kolozsvár between 1937, 1941, and 1950. On two uninterrupted parts, pp. 279 + 204, partially written by hand and partially typed, containing the author’s comments and corrections. Cloth-bound. János Vásárhelyi started writing his autobiography on 1 August 1937.

³⁷ People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (in Russian: Народный комиссариат внутренних дел, transcribed in English as: *Naródnny Komissariát Vnútrennikh Del*, abbreviated: NKVD), the Ministry of the Interior in the Soviet Union between 1934 and 1946.

have done or wanted to do. On the other hand, the Soviet–Romanian ceasefire agreement signed in Moscow on 12 September 1944 was already in force at the time, in which Romania undertook, among others, to intern German and Hungarian citizens on its territory, and the relevant section 2 of the Agreement was interpreted by the Romanian Ministry of the Interior that internment applied not only to those coming from Hungary and Germany after the Second Vienna Award but also to the entire Hungarian- and German-speaking population native to Transylvania. Even though upon the nullification of the Vienna Award all residents of Northern Transylvania should be considered again automatically and retroactively Romanian citizens of Hungarian and German nationality, the Hungarian and German nationals in Northern Transylvania, holding a Hungarian passport and living in areas under the control of the Romanian administration, shall be interned” – established the Ministry of the Interior in its classified circular no. 44 759 as per 29 September 1944.³⁸ Moreover, the secret order no. 578 832 of the Grand General of the Romanian Army of 19 October 1944 was in force. According to it, “the deserters who served in the Hungarian army and returned to their homes in the liberated Transylvania shall be considered prisoners of war be and interned in camps” on which the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie issued the classified circular letter no. 46 180 to the subordinate bodies on 27 October 1944.³⁹

Under these circumstances, the leadership of the church district, and Bishop Vásárhelyi himself, were not and could not be in an easy position as the tools and scope for action were very restricted. And, beautiful memories of student years or no memories, this also applied to Groza. Taking these aspects into account, it can be interpreted that the discourse in János Vásárhelyi’s episcopal correspondence, which has been revealed so far, overlooked the issue of the release of the mass deportees, and we can see “only” his attempts aimed at certain deported persons/personalities.

Given the circumstances, János Vásárhelyi did his best to support the initiatives taken to alleviate the fate of the prisoners as much as possible, forwarded the letters of request to the concerned and the institutions which could offer any help, and limited his prisoner-saving activity to the case(s) directly related to his family. Let us see some examples in

³⁸ National Historical Central Archives, Bucharest, Inspectorate of the Romanian Gendarmerie (NHCAB Insp. Rom. Gend.), collection 1474, file no. 119/1944, f. 22 and 25.

³⁹ NHCAB Insp. Rom. Gend., collection 1474, file no. 149/1944, f. 9.

this sense. On 5 January 1945, János Vásárhelyi informed the executive board of the church district in a letter that a campaign had started among the members of the Magyar Street congregation in Kolozsvár to help the prisoners of war in transit, and they asked for the support of the church district on this matter. “Given the noble philanthropic enterprise”, János Vásárhelyi requested that the minister of Magyar Street be paid 1 000 Hungarian pengő by the church district to be used for the relief operation with subsequent accounting obligations on his behalf.⁴⁰ Four months later, a pastoral meeting of the Maros/Mureș Presbytery took a similar initiative, when the General Assembly held on 17 May unanimously agreed to create an itinerant prisoner caretaker post “for the care of our Hungarian brethren prisoners of war imprisoned in the vast Russian Empire”. The initiators also asked that “the Bishop launch a fundraising to cover the cost of the post”.⁴¹ On 8 June, the Dean of the Reformed Presbytery of Maros, Jenő Farkas, sent the resolution to Bishop Vásárhelyi, requesting his help in establishing the “institution acting as a huge gap filler”.⁴² The bishop agreed with the initiative but pointed out that the initiative of the Presbytery of Maros could only come true if financial resources could be raised together with the neighbouring presbyteries and if there would be a minister who could undertake this service.⁴³ In the sources explored so far, we have not found any data or indications as to whether the initiative of the Presbytery of Maros was actually implemented.

On 1 May 1945, theology teacher András Nagy informed János Vásárhelyi in a letter that minister Márton Járαι in Fogaras/Făgăraș had been arrested by the Romanian authorities and had allegedly been taken to the prison camp in Caracal together with several other ministers for “having hailed only the Red and Romanian armies on a public holiday, leaving aside King Michael and Marshal Stalin”. András Nagy also informed the bishop that minister Ferenc Koncz of Nagylak/Nădlac had been taken to Gyulafehérvár, and then he had been sent home and interned on site.⁴⁴

World War II ended in Europe when on 13 May a message thrown out from a train by cadet officer Ernő Nagy, a Reformed headmaster and teacher, reached János Vásárhelyi through a railway employee. In the brief note, the prisoner asking for help said that he

⁴⁰ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 6/1945.

⁴¹ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 405/1945.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 277/1945.

was being taken away via Kolozsvár as a Soviet prisoner of war and asked the bishop to inform his wife in Iregszemcse, Tolna County, that he was alive and that László Kaszner from Balatonújhely was with him on the train.⁴⁵ On 17 May, a list containing the names of 172 Hungarian prisoner officers who would not fight on Szálasi's side and were sent to the Soviet Union from the Bratislava prison camp via Romania was thrown out of the train in or near Kolozsvár. The prisoners were asking the finder to have the list copied and send it to the American, English, Swedish, and Hungarian embassies or consulates, to Budapest, to the Ministry of Defence, and to the Roman Catholic and Reformed bishops. The majority of the 172 officers and non-commissioned officers on the list that reached János Vásárhelyi were from Hungary, but there were also some from Felvidék⁴⁶ and 20 Transylvanians. We learn from the distress message that in addition to the 172 officers, "12,000 (twelve thousand) Hungarian soldiers were transported to Russia from the Bratislava camp in several consignments."⁴⁷ Other sources indicate that some of the 12,000 prisoners of war in question were detained by the Arrow Cross in an unknown location, then taken to Soviet captivity in April 1945 and spent a month in the Bratislava camp, wherefrom they were sent away to an unknown destination.⁴⁸ On 1 June, János Vásárhelyi lodged a petition to the Universal Convention in Budapest that had been thrown out from a prisoner train passing through Kolozsvár containing a list of 172 prisoners, requesting for measures to be taken, indicating that "the relatives of the Transylvanians were informed by the competent parish ministers."⁴⁹

On 20 May 1945, András Kovács, a prisoner from Nagybózsza (Abaúj County) threw out a small note addressed directly to the Reformed bishop, from a prisoner train passing through Kolozsvár, informing him that he and his seven companions from Bózsza were most likely being taken to the Soviet Union. A typewritten copy of the message and the list was forwarded by János Vásárhelyi to Nagybózsza on 19 June 1945, asking the local minister to inform the relatives.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 295/1945.

⁴⁶ Today in Slovakia.

⁴⁷ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 343/1945.

⁴⁸ STARK, Tamás (ed., introd. study) (2017): „... akkor azt mondták kicsi robot”. *A magyar polgári lakosság elhurcolása a Szovjetunióba korabeli dokumentumok tükrében*. Budapest, MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, Történettudományi Intézet. 284.

⁴⁹ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 343/1945.

⁵⁰ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 404/1945.

On 12 June, Bishop László Ravasz sent a list to the ministers of the Danubian Reformed congregations and to János Vásárhelyi containing the names of the Reformed faithful held in the camp set up in the Ferenc József barracks in Pécs. Among the 128 prisoners on the list, in addition to prisoners from Hungary, there were also detainees from Szatmár/Satu Mare, Bihar/Bihor, Szilágyság/Sălaj, Kolozs County, Háromszék, Gyergyószék/Gheorgheni, and Udvarhelyszék/Scaunul Odorhei.⁵¹

On 22 June, János Vásárhelyi forwarded to the universal convention the list containing the names of ten ministers held in captivity in the Soviet camp in Focșani. As he said, they were all healthy and asked for their fellow ministers' relatives and presbyters to be informed.⁵²

5. Attempts for the Release of a Family Member

Now let us examine the case directly affecting János Vásárhelyi's family, more precisely his attempts to have his detained son-in-law, Colonel Tibor Vladár, released. In a letter dated 25 April 1945, Vásárhelyi informed László Ravasz, the Transbiscan Reformed Bishop, that his son-in-law was imprisoned, and his daughter was in Rudabánya with her three children. He asked him to inquire if possible about his daughter's conditions.⁵³ On 7 May, János Vásárhelyi asked the Romanian Minister of the Interior that his daughter, Vladár Tiborné Magda Vásárhelyi, and her three underage children could stay in Kolozsvár from June to September and receive family benefits as the father was a prisoner of war.⁵⁴ Colonel Tibor Vladár was most likely on his way to the Soviet Union in mid-May because at that time we find him in the Soviet prison camp in Focșani. On 5 June, János Vásárhelyi informed him in a letter sent through a woman travelling to her son detained in the Focșani camp that: "We received a letter from Magdi twice. She is in Rudabánya with the children. (...) Now we are doing everything we can so that Magdi can come to us with the children, and I hope that will happen soon." Vásárhelyi

⁵¹ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 509/1945.

⁵² Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 524a/1945.

⁵³ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 220/1945.

⁵⁴ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 290/1945.

asked his son-in-law to reply to him as soon as he received the letter.⁵⁵ Colonel Vladár certainly did this because on 18 June János Vásárhelyi had already informed him that “we received the news about you and the related things through your friend” and that the Ministry of the Interior in Bucharest “issued (...) the residence permit for his wife, i.e. the bishop’s daughter, and the children, and soon we will get the endorsement from the Russian High Command.” Vásárhelyi also informed his son-in-law that: “I will do my best in your case, too, and I hope I can take favourable measures. I am trying to get in touch with the most competent factors for this matter.”⁵⁶ And the bishop acted indeed accordingly. On 22 June, he wrote a letter to Colonel-General János Vörös, Hungarian Minister of Defence⁵⁷, asking him to “allow, if possible, with his support” the extradition of his son-in-law, Colonel Tibor Vladár, to the Hungarian government.⁵⁸ Also on 22 June, János Vásárhelyi sent a similar letter to Hungarian Prime Minister Béla Miklós Dálnoki about Colonel Vladár’s case.⁵⁹ It is not clear from the sources revealed so far when Colonel Vladár came home to his family; in any case, in his letter sent to his daughter Magdi, dated 22 October 1945, Bishop Vásárhelyi mentioned that “unfortunately, we have not received any further information about Tibor.”⁶⁰

6. Conclusions

The excerpts selected from his correspondence reflect the measures taken by János Vásárhelyi on this serious issue he experienced during very difficult times. Steps taken for the release and assistance of prisoners of war and civilian deportees/internees were hampered by factors such as the presence and position of power of the Soviet military and political authorities in Transylvania/Romania, which also played a key role in the mass deportation of Hungarians from Hungary and Transcarpathia⁶¹ as well as the increased anti-

⁵⁵ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 354/1945.

⁵⁶ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 420/1945.

⁵⁷ János Vörös (1891–1968): officer, colonel general, Chief of Staff, Minister of Defence between 22 December 1944 and 15 November 1945.

⁵⁸ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 427/1945.

⁵⁹ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 428/1945 and no. 466/1945.

⁶⁰ Ep. A. CARCDT, collection A21, registered documents, no. 922/1945.

⁶¹ Today in Ukraine.

Hungarian atmosphere and the series of measures taken centrally in Romania in the autumn of 1944. János Vásárhelyi could hardly turn to the Hungarian government for support for all Hungarian prisoners from Transylvania because the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of prisoners were also taken from Hungary just as from Transylvania and/or Transcarpathia and Bácska/Bačka⁶². Given the circumstances, neither the leaders of the church district nor Bishop Vásárhelyi had enough room for manoeuvre that would have allowed him to rescue the prisoners effectively.

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⁶² Today in Serbia (85%), Hungary (14%), and Croatia (1%).

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